



# Comparing existence and nonexistence

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*Based on joint work with John  
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# Outline

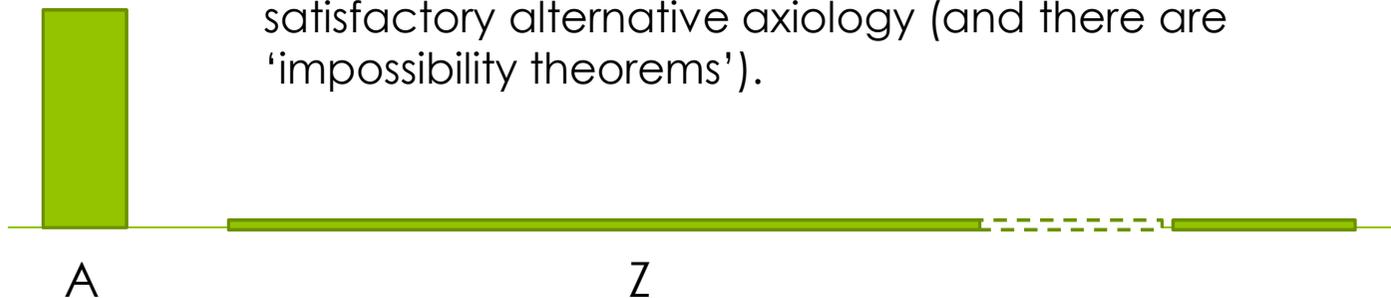
- Background: 'Existence comparativism' (EC) and its importance to population axiology
- The Incoherence Argument against EC
- Resisting the Incoherence Argument (I): The Menagerie Argument
- Resisting the Incoherence Argument (II): The Lives Framework
- Summary and conclusions

# 'Existence Comparativism' (EC)

- Any sane approach to ethics must acknowledge both 'better' (-simpliciter) and 'better for'.
- Let B be a state of affairs that is 'exactly like' A except that an additional person, Peggy, exists in B but not in A.
- Suppose that Peggy's life (in B) is very happy, fulfilling, etc.
- Several approaches to population axiology agree that B is better-*simpliciter* than A.
- Our question (though): Is B better *for Peggy* than A?
  - *Existence Comparativism (EC)*: If Peggy does not exist in A, then "B is better (resp. worse) for Peggy than A" is true iff Peggy's life in B is one of positive (resp. negative) net lifetime well-being.
    - In particular: according to EC, the truth of "B is better for Peggy than A" does not require that Peggy exists in both A and B.

# Background: Population axiology

- Population axiology: the theory of when one state of affairs is better than another, where *the states of affairs may differ over the number of people who ever live*.
- Total utilitarianism (TU)? Average utilitarianism?
- The Repugnant Conclusion (RC): For any state of affairs X, there exists an alternative state of affairs in which no-one has a life that is more than barely worth living, and that is not worse than X.
- Most people reject this conclusion, and hence TU.
  - But it's very hard to come up with an otherwise-satisfactory alternative axiology (and there are 'impossibility theorems').

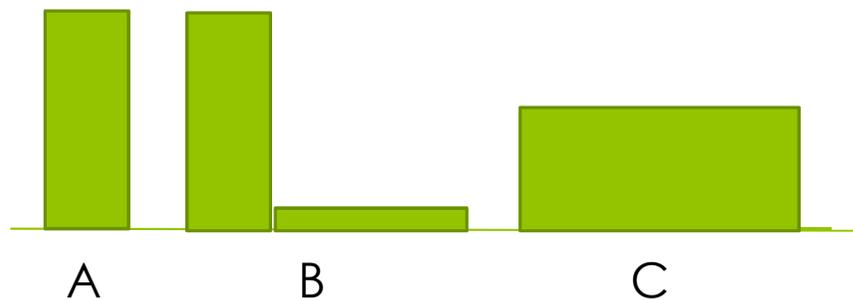


# Motivations (I): The non-identity problem

- 'Non-identity' cases: outcome-pairs in which
  - There is an intuitively clear verdict on which outcome is better; but
  - There is no person *who exists in both outcomes* and who is worse off in the intuitively-worse outcome than in the intuitively-better.
- Parfit's examples: The 14-year-old Girl, Depletion or Conservation, etc.
- An inconsistent triad:
  - The 'intuitively worse' state of affairs in a non-identity case *is* worse(-simpliciter) than the 'intuitively better' one.
  - Person-affecting principle (PAP): X is better (resp. worse) than Y only if X is better (resp. worse) than Y *for at least one person*.
  - EC is false.
- Usual response to this argument: reject PAP (and appeal to "impersonal" good). But this is puzzling.
- *Iff* EC is true, then we can hang on the obvious betterness/worseness relations in non-identity cases *without* rejecting PAP.

# Motivations (II): An argument for the Repugnant Conclusion

- Mere Addition (MA): If B differs from A only by the 'mere addition' of extra persons, and those extra persons each have positive well-being, then B is not worse than A, 'other things being equal' (desert, etc.).
- Non-Anti-Egalitarianism (NAE): If C has the same population and higher average (and therefore total) well-being than B, then C is not worse than B, other things being equal.



- MA and NAE entail RC.
- Usual responses: accept RC (total utilitarians), or deny MA (others).
- But it's much harder to deny MA if EC is true ( $EC \wedge \text{Pareto} \rightarrow MA$ ).

# Assessing EC

- The *intuitions* are equivocal.
  - Pro-EC: “All of us, I believe, are fortunate to have been born.” (Nagel (1979), p.7)
  - Anti-EC: If I hadn’t existed I wouldn’t have *lost out*, because there would be no me at all/I wouldn’t have had any *interests*...
- But there is also an *argument* against EC: the ‘Incoherence Argument’.

# The Incoherence Argument against EC

- [I]t cannot ever be true that it is better for a person that she lives than that she should never have lived at all. If it were better for a person that she lives than that she should never have lived at all, then if she had never lived at all, that would have been worse for her than if she had lived. But if she had never lived at all, there would have been no her for it to be worse for, so it could not have been worse for her. (Broome 1993)

## (Semi-)Formalising the Incoherence Argument

- Ontological commitment (OC): For all worlds  $w$  if “A is better than B for S” is true in  $w$ , then S exists in  $w$ .
- Limited Invariance (LI): For all worlds  $w$ , if “A is better than B for S” is true in  $w$ , then “A is better for B for S” is true in both A and B.

Therefore,

- If “A is better than B for S” is true in any world, then S exists both in A and in B. (From OC, LI)

Therefore,

- EC is false.

# Extant responses to the Incoherence Argument

- Accept the conclusion (and reject EC): most 'person-affecting' theorists, many advocates even of "impersonal" population axiologies (incl. Broome).
- Deny LI: Arrhenius and Rabinowicz (2015)
- Deny OC: Roberts (2011); Holtug (2001); Fleurbaey and Voorhoeve (2014)

# More on rejecting OC

- Roberts, Holtug: A is better than B for s iff A's well-being level is higher in A than it is in B. And if s does not exist in A, then s's well-being level in A is zero.
  - Bykvist's (2007) objection (and many others): "Well-being implies being". (A monadic analogue of the Incoherence Argument.)
- Fleurbaey and Voorhoeve: "The literature seems to have failed to see the difference between persons as concrete objects and persons as they figure in ordinary discourse. A concrete object has properties only in the states in which it exists... But when we discuss possible people, the topic of our debate is not only concrete persons... it is persons as they are considered by evaluators of possible worlds..."
  - This is obscure (and doesn't engage with the motivations for OC).

# Two new ways to reject OC

- 'Two new ways' to be explored in this talk:
  - Via appeal to the 'Menagerie Argument';
  - Via appeal to the 'Lives Framework'.
- Three preliminary observations:
  - 1) In general, we know that we must allow 'mere possibilia' to serve in our semantics.
  - 2) Broome's argument effectively assumes that the semantics for 'A is better for Peggy than B' must closely mirror its surface grammar. But in general, surface grammar is not a very good guide to semantics. There is 'wobble room' here.
  - 3) There are limits to the plausibility of both these kinds of move, though. 'Hilary kicked a dog' cannot be true unless at least one dog exists...
    - 1) A merely possible dog will not suffice.
    - 2) And the ontological commitment cannot be dodged via appeal to the semantic proposal *Kicked-a-dog(Hilary)*.

# The 'Menagerie Argument'

- Let P be the proposition that Pegasus does not exist.
- The Menagerie Argument:
  - Pegasus does not exist (assumption, for *reductio*).
  - If Pegasus does not exist, then P is true. (Ascent)
  - If P is true, then P exists. (OC\*1)
  - If P exists, then Pegasus exists. (OC\*2)
  - Therefore, Pegasus exists.
- *Reductio*; therefore, Pegasus exists.

# Responses to the Menagerie Argument

- Accept the conclusion: Pegasus exists.
  - Modal realism (Lewis), or
  - Necessitarianism (Williamson (2013)).
- Deny OC\*2 (Plantinga (1983)): hold that a ('singular') proposition can exist without its apparent 'constituents' themselves existing.
  - There's no sufficiently coherent notion of 'constituency'; or,
  - The existence of the proposition P requires only the existence of the *individual essence* of Pegasus (which exists necessarily), not of Pegasus himself.
- Distinguish between 'strong truth' and 'weak truth' (Fine (2005)). [Equivalently, 'inner'/'outer' truth, or 'truth-in'/'truth-at'.]
  - Strong but not weak truth of a given proposition presupposes the existence of the proposition in question.
  - If 'true' refers to strong truth, then Ascent is false.
  - If 'true' refers to weak truth, then OC\*1 is false.

# The Menagerie Argument and the Incoherence Argument

- Any of these moves *also* supplies resources for resisting the Incoherence Argument: 'A is better than B for Peggy' is like 'Pegasus does not exist'.
  - Modal realism/necessitarianism: Every possible person exists, so OC is (true, but) toothless. (Peggy needn't be an *inhabitant of/be concrete* in both A and B.)
  - Reject the notion of constituency, or allow individual essences/mere possibilia to 'stand in' for individuals in the semantics: then OC is unmotivated.
  - Strong/weak truth: There is at least *one perfectly coherent sense of 'true'* in which 'A is better than B for Peggy' can be true (and hence OC false), namely weak-truth.
- The upshot: maybe none of the responses to the Menagerie Argument is entirely satisfactory, but we must accept at least one; and whichever we do accept, we then have resources for resisting the Incoherence Argument against EC.
- Worry: This line of argument, *as it stands*, proves too much.
  - Why isn't "Hilary kicked a dog" also 'like' "Pegasus does not exist"? (WIP.)

# The Lives Framework

- The 'Persons framework':
  - Fundamental ideology:
    - A set  $W$  of possible states of affairs;
    - A set  $P$  of possible persons;
    - A three-place *better-for* relation  $\geq(X,Y,S)$ ,  $X,Y \in W$ ,  $S \in P$ .
  - Semantics for "A is better than B for Peggy":  $\geq(A,B,Peggy)$ .
- The alternative 'Lives Framework':
  - Fundamental ideology: A set  $L$  of possible lives, and a two-place *better-for-the-individual* relation  $\geq_i$  on  $L$ .
  - Semantics for "A is better than B for Peggy":  $\geq_i(x,y)$ , where  $x$  (resp.  $y$ ) is the life that Peggy has in A (resp. in B).
  - (A state of affairs induces a *population*: a 'supermultiset' of  $L$ .)
- And (promissory note) the Incoherence Argument cannot be stated in this latter 'lives framework'.

# Independent reasons to prefer Lives to Persons

- Transworld identity relations aren't fundamental anyway; the Lives Framework is therefore a better candidate for fundamental framework than the Persons Framework, on the grounds that it doesn't use them.
- Even in the persons framework that initially builds in primitive personal-identity information, most of us accept an 'Anonymity' principle that prevents that information from mattering in the end.
  - If so, it would be more elegant to not have that information even *appearing* to matter in the first place.
- The Lives Framework facilitates an arguably more elegant treatment of interpersonal well-being comparisons (e.g. Broome (2004), p.97).
- (Invitation: suggest others?)

# Existence Comparativism meets the Lives Framework

- In the Lives Framework, Existence Comparativism corresponds to the claim that (in whatever sense 'there are' possible lives in any case) there is a 'null life'.
- The Lives Framework does not *have* to include a null life. But **there's no obvious reason why it can't, either.**
  - We don't *have* to identify lives with (e.g.) centred worlds *with occupied centres...*
- In particular, there doesn't seem to be any analogue of the Incoherence Argument in this framework.

# Lives-framework<sub>EC</sub> analysis of “A is better than B for Peggy”

- The states of affairs A and B each correspond to unique *populations*. (Write A, B for those populations, too.)
- Take every population to be a *countably infinite* multiset, containing all the non-null lives we previously took it to contain, and in addition a countable infinity of copies of the null life.
- There is a (probably contextually determined) privileged counterpart relation between A and B, mapping the lives in A to those in B (but not everyone in A need have a non-null counterpart in B, or vice versa).
- ‘Peggy’ picks out some particular life in A (null or otherwise), and its counterpart in B (null or otherwise)
- “A is better than B for Peggy” is true iff the A-life picked out by “Peggy” stands in the  $\succeq_1$  relation to the B-life that is picked out by “Peggy”.
- This condition does not require that Peggy exists in (i.e. that ‘Peggy’ picks out a *non-null* life relative to) both A and B.

# Summary and conclusions

- The truth or falsity of 'existence comparativism' (EC) is a key choice point in population axiology.
- Most theorists take EC to be false, because they are convinced by the Incoherence Argument.
- We have offered two new ways to reject the Incoherence Argument: by appeal to the Menagerie Argument, and by appeal to the Lives Framework, both of which are independently motivated.
- It does not follow that EC is true. But symmetry is at least restored.
- The prevailing opinion that the Incoherence Argument is sound is an artefact of naivete about the extent to which semantics must mirror surface grammar.

# References

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- Williamson (2013), *Modal logic as metaphysics*